

George Michael on Michael Jackson, Amy Winehouse, life, love and having a family Christmas

The late afternoon is deepening around a small, leafy patch of central London. At this time of year, of course, the trees are almost bare and the fallen foliage crackles underfoot. Outside, the slowly sinking sun is filling George Michael's spacious home with a deep, warm winter glow, while inside the singer is talking about his latest release, *Live In London*, the first ever live concert DVD of this career. And there's one scene in particular that he's musing on right now. "Oh My God, it still cracks me up!" laughs George, "Every time I think about it. And how great that it was caught on film! Did you see it?" asks the singer.

The concert, which covers 23 songs from Michaels' historic career, was filmed last August at London's Earls Court Arena during the final two nights of his triumphant worldwide 25 Live Tour. The DVD, which includes a special behind-the-scenes documentary, *I'd Know Him A Mile Off*, offers tantalising glimpses of Michael, now 46, before and after his performance, and shows him whizzing in and out of his costume during the interval break, too.

In fact, if you've ever wondered what might be happening backstage as you queued for your hot dog during the 20-minute interval, then you need wonder no more. "David was following me around with a camera backstage," explains George, referring to his childhood best friend, David Austin. "So I didn't take much notice, and I didn't even think some of that stuff would be included. Then we watched it back and decided to include some of the scenes because we thought the fans would love them."

But the moment on the DVD that causes the singer much hilarity - and is making him laugh even now - shows Michael being driven to the back gates of the venue for his last night on stage. His vehicle is suddenly stopped by an over-zealous security guard who simply won't believe that the passenger in the back of the car is actually the performer that everyone, now queuing at the front of the building, has come to see.

"I'd know him a mile off!" proclaims the supremely confident guard to a very amused George Michael, before finally letting him pass.

Mistaken identities aside, is Michael, who was creative director for the DVD, happy with the final result? "Oh yeah, totally," he responds. "I'm really proud of it. For three years we'd been constantly working on the lighting, sound, graphics and stage design, because we wanted to get it all as near perfect as possible before any filming was done. And the performances went really well on both nights too, so that was a relief."

Live in London, which features tracks spanning Michael's career - including *Careless Whisper*, *Faith* and *Everything She Wants* - makes compelling viewing, and that's even without the backstage pass. Filmed and edited with an immediacy and freshness not often seen in any concert footage, sometimes we're so close to Michael on stage, it's like being in the band. "This

is the first time - and probably the last - that I'll ever release a film of myself in concert. But I think it stands as a great testament to that experience, and I really wanted it to be ready for the fans in time for Christmas," says George, who is also releasing a brand new version of his single December Song this month.

This wistful, haunting ballad is classic George Michael, and marks the singer's second offering for the festive season (the first being the iconic Last Christmas, of course.) Interestingly, the song samples Frank Sinatra at the beginning, rather than someone like Bing Crosby, who would perhaps be a more obvious choice for a festive single. "It's Frank Sinatra who reminds me of Christmas," explains George. "During the school holidays, when I was a kid, I used to work behind the bar of my dad's restaurant in Edgware, and he'd always play Sinatra records. So that association is very strong for me."

Is it safe to assume, then, that this is one of his favourite times of the year? "Yes, I do love Christmas!" replies George, who co-wrote December Song with David Austin.

"I always have done, ever since I was a child. When I was young, both my parents used to work so hard and they always seemed quite stressed to me. But at Christmas everyone would calm down and be nice to each other for a few days, and that used to make me feel very safe. I didn't feel particularly secure as a child, which I think came from my parents being so busy and distracted. They were just trying to make a better life for all of us I suppose. With December Song I wanted to capture that blend of warmth, tinged with a sort of melancholy that I used to feel then. David's known me forever, so we have a sort of shared memory of those times."

The charming, animated video for the single shows a solitary little boy who dreams of a magical, animated world, which comes to life at Christmas. In one way it could represent the frightened little boy that George Michael was for some parts of his childhood. But it also seems to reach out to any child in recognition of the fact that, sometimes, living in an adult world can be a confusing and lonely experience. "I've talked a lot about this with Kenny," says George, referring to Kenny Goss, his partner of 13 years. "His experiences - on an emotional level anyway - were very similar to mine, and he's always loved Christmas for the same reason."

There is certainly one thing that Michael would like to reappear from those innocent, childhood days. "Why doesn't it snow at the right time anymore, like it did in the '60s?" asks George. "If it could snow on Christmas Eve, that would be perfect."

How will he be spending the holiday season this year? "In London," he says. "I'll be at home with Kenny" That must surely scotch any press speculation that Michael has split up with his long-term partner, even though the papers have been suggesting it since last year. "And my family will be coming over too, of course. I love having my family with me on Christmas day."

What? No chunky jumpers? No dyed blonde hair and no outing on a snowy mountain with his pals this year?

It's 25 years since Last Christmas got to number two in the charts (it was just beaten to the top spot by Band Aid) but the accompanying video is still burnt into our collective festive consciousness as the template of how to handle unrequited love in front of a roaring log fire.

What does Michael think now, if he should ever catch some of his old videos on You Tube or somewhere? "I cringe mostly!" he laughs. "Take that blonde hair," he says, referring to his über cut from the '80s. "I wanted to have long, blonde, straight hair because I didn't really want to be me. So the short, dark, curly hair had to go. Looking back I suppose I could have done without those curtain rings in my ears as well. And the shorts with the shuttlecocks down them too," he adds as an afterthought. "I mean, how stupid did that look? But then again, Andrew [Ridgeley] and I were just young guys having fun, and that's an age when you're still experimenting with your image, so of course mistakes were made.

"To be honest, I don't think I was ever really confident about the way I looked in those days. But the one thing I did believe in was my talent as a songwriter. Once I had my foot in the door of the music industry, nothing was going to shift me."

For Michael, there was one moment he says, when he knew he had arrived. "When I was 19, I wrote Freedom - the original version - and I thought, 'I can't believe I've just done that!' I was absolutely thrilled. Because until then I had no real understanding of my abilities, but with Freedom, I started to take myself seriously as a writer."

So where does that leave Careless Whisper, then? That anthem to doomed love. The song that George Michael doesn't even have to sing at his own concerts anymore, because the audience does it for him?

"I'm still a bit puzzled about why it's made such an impression on people," he says. "Is it because so many people have cheated on their partners? Is that why they connect with it?"

"I have no idea, but it's ironic that this song - which has come to define me in some way - should have been written right at the beginning of my career when I was still so young. I was only 17 and didn't really know much about anything - and certainly nothing much about relationships."

Ironic, indeed. That one song, written on the number 32 bus by the precociously talented teenager, as he made his way to a Watford cinema where he was working as an usher, would later go on to reach Number One in more than 25 countries, and sell in excess of six million copies around the world.

Michael says he's learnt a thing or two about the music business in the ensuing years, and thinks he now knows what it takes to maintain a successful and enduring career in pop music. What counsel would he give, then, to any young musician setting out on a similar road to his own? He doesn't hesitate.

"I'd advise anyone to understand that fame, and all the attention you'll receive, won't satisfy you

for any length of time if you don't really believe in what you're doing with regards to your music. And if you really do have talent, recognise that as a real privilege and hang on to it, no matter what."

On the subject of talent, it can't have gone unnoticed by Michael that another towering genius of the pop world - Michael Jackson - died on the British singer's birthday (June 25) this year. Did he find that poignant? "It was sad, and a bit surreal, too," says the star. "Jackson's influence on the industry was massive and he made some incredible albums, especially in the '80s. But I do feel there was some lost potential there. Maybe that level of celebrity simply puts a stop to any musical brilliance."

Right now, though, Michael has his eye on some new stars in the firmament, and two in particular have him turning up the volume on his radio. "In my opinion, Amy Winehouse is probably the most talented singer/songwriter to have come out of Britain in the last few years. And I'm quite impressed with Lady Gaga, too," he says. "She's a very original songwriter with quite a unique overall package."

Outside, the winter sun has disappeared and the surrounding streets seem very quiet indeed. "It's funny," says George, gazing out of the window, "but I can't seem to get away from here - this five-mile radius where I was born. Maybe it's because I'm a Cancer. We're supposed to be homely people, and I'm just like that. I feel very comfortable in this part of the world."

For all his touring, Michael is first and foremost a Londoner, and that makes him more than aware of the social problems facing such a large city, including homelessness. He supports more than one organisation that helps people on the streets, including this one, The Big Issue, which has been a firm favourite of his for many years.

But home-loving George will be cancelling the milk, packing his bags and double-locking his front door early next year, when he heads off for a tour of Australia, somewhere he hasn't visited since his Wham! days. The tickets may have completely sold out already, but there's always Live in London for anyone not lucky enough to catch the shows down under.

Caught on film, right at the end of the concert, there's a moment - just before Michael leaves the stage - when he turns to his throng of adoring fans and shouts: "Thank you for 25 amazing years!"

The immediate roar from the crowd suggest that - then, as now - the feeling is entirely mutual.

Live in London DVD, released through Sony music Entertainment, is out now. December Song is released on Island Records on December 14, and also on download from the 13th.